

William H. Bowers House
254 North Sycamore Street
Petersburg
Virginia

Winwid Co.

HABS NO. VA-68

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VA
27 PET
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Reduced Copies of Measured Drawings

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

HABS
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BOWERS HOUSE
Petersburg, Virginia

Owner: Occupied by Southworth's Drug Store.

Date of Erection: c.1827

Architect: Unknown

Builder: William G. Bowers

Present Condition: Structurally good, interior throughout and first floor both interior and exterior much altered.

Number of Stories: three and one-half

Materials of Construction: Brick, metal roof, connected double chimneys, wrought iron balconies, stone lintels, wood trim.

Other Existing Records: None known

Additional Data: Quoted from letter to the Director, National Park Service from O. F. Northington, Jr., Superintendent of Petersburg National Military Park, dated August 13, 1938:

"Investigation of local histories and talks with local historians have brought out the fact that this house was built by William G. Bowers about 1827. No one seems to know what the house was called at that time or what name was applied to it in the decades immediately thereafter. Apparently, the only names have been those of firms doing business there, except in comparatively recent years it was known as the "Marble Front".

Approved: Eugene Parashinsky

Date: March 28, 1939

reviewed, Nov. 1939. J.P.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. VA-68

WILLIAM H. BOWERS HOUSE

HABS
VA
27-PET,
7-

Location: 254 North Sycamore Street (southwest corner of North Sycamore Street and West Bank Street), Petersburg, Virginia

Present Owner: Miss Martha Dunlop Spotswood
320 High Street
Petersburg, Virginia

Present Occupant: Magee's Corner Store (Owner: Sidney Skoland)

Present Use: Store, first floor, other floors storage.

Statement of Significance: This fine Federal building was built c. 1828-1829 for William H. Bowers, a wealthy dry goods merchant, with his store below and living quarters above. Particularly noteworthy are the fine wrought iron balconies on the north facade and the woodwork of the dormers.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: c. 1828-1829 (Landbook 1828 and 1829, Handwritten bound manuscripts in the Clerk's Office of Hustings Court, Petersburg).
2. Architect: Unknown.
3. Original and subsequent owners: A partial chain of title for the building follows. Deed Books are in the Clerk's office of Hustings Court at Petersburg. Several earlier transparencies of the property are noted in Section B., "Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure."

1827 Deed November 2, 1827 recorded in
Book 8 page 88
William Clark, Jr.
Jane Clark
to
William H. Bowers
(property)

1829 Deed December 19, 1829 recorded in
Book 8 page 235
William H. Bowers
to
Gardiner Green Howland
Samuel Shaw Howland

- 1841 Deed April 1, 1841 recorded in
Book 12 page 49
Gardiner Green Howland
Louisa M. Howland
Samuel Shaw Howland
Joanna E. Howland
to
George Ansley Davis
- 1847 Deed February 2, 1847 recorded in
Book 16 page 174
George Ansley Davis
Iepica M. Davis
to
Goodman Davis
- 1881 Deed November 28, 1881 recorded in
Book 42 page 483
Michael M. Davis
Miriam M. Davis
Rebecca Davis
to
J. T. Young
- 1881 Deed November 28, 1881 recorded in
Book 42 page 485
J. T. Young
to
Charles T. Collier
(one-half share of property)
- 1884 Deed April 1, 1884 recorded in
Book 45 page 267
J. T. Young
Mary A. Young
to
J. W. Young
(one-half share of property)
- 1885 Deed January 2, 1885 recorded in
Book 46 page 170
Charles T. Collier
to
J. W. Young
(one-half share of property)
- 1893 Deed December 30, 1893 recorded in
Book 56 page 503
J. W. Young
Mary E. Young
to
William F. Spotswood

1916 Deed September 19, 1916 recorded in
Book 88 page 562
Isabella Spotswood
Dandridge Spotswood
to
Martha B. D. Spotswood
Catherine F. Spotswood

4. Original plans and construction: Unknown.
5. Alterations and additions: Chimneys removed c. 1954 (personal interview with Miss Martha Dunlop Spotswood, 320 High Street, Petersburg, 7/4/1968). Store front on first floor is modern. It replaces an earlier (1859) store front alteration.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

The following account of the history of this building is taken from "History in Old Buildings," The Progress-Index, Petersburg, October 3, 1965, p. 9, c. 6.

"The war of 1812 was raging, the war in which Petersburg volunteers had just earned for their town the proud soubriquet of 'The Cockade City of the Union.' Many adventuresome (sic) and patriotic young men were going to sea to do their part in the challenge to Britain's vaunted mastery of the waves. In the newly dubbed Cockade City in the summer of 1814 Michael Burke was one of these. After duly giving Thomas W. Worrell his power of attorney in his absence, he straightway on July 13, 1814, sold him 'a certain lot of land lying and being in the town of Petersburg at the corner of Bank and Sycamore Streets at present in the occupation of William Clark Jr., as a grocery store.'

"On the following November 19, 1814, this corner property was surveyed and laid out into three lots which were numbered Lots 3, 4, and 5 by William Wynn, a civil engineer. Three days later Lots 3 and 4 were sold to William Clark Jr. These lots 'together containing 44 feet 11 inches on Sycamore Street and carrying the same width back 50 feet westward to the alley, and bounded by Bank Street on the north and Lot No. 5 in the same Plot on the south.' Lots 3 and 4 were after this to be treated as one.

"The next decade was to witness the association of 'the Corner' with some of the most prominent names in the social history of Petersburg, an association which has continued to be present.

"William Clark, Jr., in order to indemnify the firm of Cuthbert and Smith, to which he had become indebted, had been forced to convey the property in trust to the distinguished lawyer, John Fitzhugh May, but later having managed to discharge his obligations, on November 2, 1827, he sold the Corner to William H. Bowers. Bowers was married to a former Miss Willison, a great-niece of Martha Washington. They in time erected this handsome structure with its charming balconies of wrought iron which overlook Bank Street, and which has ever since graced the Corner. Their lavish living apartments were in the building above their 'dry goods' emporium. Miss Martha Dunlop Spotswood, the present owner of the property and herself a relative of the first 'First Lady,' possesses a delightful colored sketch of the building which was made by the elder William S. Simpson, (now according to Miss Spotswood at the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond) apparently not long after its completion.

"Bowers, whose extravagant taste would seem from extant court records nearly always to have kept him in financial difficulties, entered into an agreement, in 1829, with John F. May, and a well known New York firm would act as his correspondent plus endorse his notes. In trust, for these considerations, was put his Corner properties. Within seven months' time the New York Partners entered into an agreement with Bowers and May whereby the Howlands accepted all the pledged property as payment to them in full for his indebtedness to them.

"It was not until 1841 that the Howland firm sold to George Ansley Davis this property at the corner of Bank and Sycamore Streets which was rented at that time by J. W. Bradbury and Company.

"George Ansley Davis was a member of a prosperous and prominent family living in Petersburg at that time. He in turn sold it to a relative, Goodman Davis, who later resided in Richmond. Goodman Davis was the son of George Davis, a member of the Common Council of Petersburg. The three sisters of Goodman Davis were celebrated belles of that era; Kate Davis became the wife of Alfred Moses, a native of London and the first clerk and supervisor of the Richmond School Board; another sister was married to Captain Ezekiel J. Levy of the Richmond Light Infantry Blues; and Rebecca Davis was the wife of Anthony M. Keiley, a brilliant Catholic lawyer and editor who once served as Richmond's mayor.

"It must have been during the period of Goodman Davis' ownership that James Thomas Young, watchmaker and jeweler, became the tenant of this property. Certainly Davis was the landlord in 1859 when the 'marble front,' the finest of

its kind in Petersburg, was added to the store at a time when 'iron fronts' were the rage. The building was to be called 'The Marble Front' for years to come. Most unfortunately this superb front was removed in this century just prior to the second World War.

"On November 28, 1881, Michael M. Davis, the sole heir of Goodman Davis and Rebecca Davis, the widow with dower right of Goodman Davis, sold the Corner to their tenant J. T. Young. On the same day Charles F. Collier, who served as Mayor of Petersburg from 1889 to 1898, acquired a deed of trust on the property to secure the payment of certain notes. Since a default was made by J. T. Young, Collier, in pursuance of the terms of the deed of trust, sold an undivided half interest in the property at public auction, the highest bidder being John William Young, brother to J. T. Young. John William Young had previously purchased an undivided half interest in the property from J. T. Young. Therefore, in 1885, J. W. Young became sole owner of the Corner. He was the father of the late Mrs. Robert B. (Rosa Young) Stiles, a well-known Petersburg florist for many years.

"On December 30, 1893, the Corner was sold to William Francisco Spotswood. Mr. Spotswood, an apothecary, was the grandson of Peter Francisco, the Revolutionary hero. Only two years after Mr. Spotswood moved his business to the Corner property he died.

"On September 19, 1916, when Mrs. Isabella M. Dunlop made over the property to her daughters, the Misses Catherine Francisco and Martha Dunlop Spotswood, it was occupied by E. A. Morrison as a drug store. It has ever since continued as a drug store. The present owner of this distinguished property is Miss Martha Dunlop Spotswood of 'Stirling Castle,' (320 High St.) Petersburg.

Prepared by Randall J. Biallas
University of Illinois, Urbana
August 1968

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The William H. Bowers House is Federal style. The dormers with their split pediments and ornamental details, the cast-iron balconies, and the insect panels between floors are the most significant exterior architectural features.

2. Condition of Fabric: The first floor has been completely renovated and the exterior has a modern store front. The exterior of the upper floors is in fairly good condition. Upper floors of the interior are in poor condition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: Rectangular, 23'7" x 50'. Four stories plus a basement. Front (Sycamore St.) Elevation is three bays wide, side elevation is five bays wide.
2. Foundations: Brick foundation walls and piers.
3. Wall construction: Brick, reddish brown, which has been discolored through time.
4. Chimneys: There is one existing brick chimney at the center of the rear wall. Originally there were five chimneys, including two along each side wall. These were removed some time after 1935, when the HABS measured drawings were made.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: There are presently two exterior entrances, one on Sycamore Street leading directly into the store, and the other W. Bank (service entrance). According to the measured drawings there was, at one time, a second, central door opening onto W. Bank Street, and more fashionable in style.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Windows on the first three floors are alike, with the obvious exception of the store front and the central windows on the West Bank Street facade. Typical windows are double hung with 6 lights in each sash. Each has a stone sill and lintel. The lintel has small, incised rectangular mouldings at each end. Basement windows are similar to those of other floors. All have light wells, in some cases blocked up or covered over. On the front and side elevations there are, or were, rectangular wooden panels set in brick between the first and second floors and between the second and third. On the Sycamore Street facade there are oval panels above the third floor windows, while on the West Bank Street elevation, the panels at this level continue to be rectangular. All decorative panels are in line with the windows. Windows at side balconies (north) are similar but include side lights. At fourth floor (attic) the north side windows are arched at top (brick arch with keystone) and mullions in top sash splay out to meet arch at 90°. The center of the three windows at this level (north) also has side lights similar to the balcony windows. A large parapet between the former chimneys has been removed (each side) and with it

oval brick openings at the parapet level.

- c. Dormers: Two front and two rear (similar). Double-hung arched windows (six lights each sash) flanked by decorative wood pilasters and capped by split pediment.
- 6. Structural system: Brick bearing walls with wooden joists spanning between (parallel to Sycamore Street) wooden rafters at roof.
- 7. Roof shape and covering: Gabled roof, tin covering.
- 8. Balconies: At the second and third floors (north) are ornamental cast-iron balconies with supporting brackets which extend approximately 3' from the exterior wall. These balconies are a striking feature of the north facade.
- 9. Cornice: Wooden cornice along front is very decorative, with flat mullions and a beaded bed moulding.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: Basement, large open space with brick piers dividing it. First floor completely remodeled--modern. Stairs at rear lead to upper floors. Second, third, and fourth floors fall along right wall (facing front). One large room in front and two on side open onto hall (single loaded). Other small rooms apparently not original.
- 2. Stairways: There is a winding open stairway between the second and third floors--one of the most striking of the interior spaces. Space "flows" through between floors in a very pleasant manner. Bannister and many rails are now broken. Stairs are generally in disrepair.
- 3. Flooring: The basement floor is concrete. Wooden planks (probably original) are on all other floors.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: The basement walls are brick with exposed wooden deck ceiling; the second, third, and fourth floor walls and ceiling are all painted plaster. (Interior walls plaster on wood lath.)
- 5. Doorways and doors: There is one double doorway on the second floor and one on the third; all others are single.
- 6. Details and trim: Door openings have moulded wooden trim. Each end of lintel has decoration of moulded concentric circles. Mantel at third floor has wooden pilasters each side of fire box.

7. Lighting: Modern.
8. Heating: Oil stoves which vent into fireplace flues (upper floor); no longer in use.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building faces east on N. Sycamore St. and W. Bank St. in the downtown commercial district. Diagonally to the northwest is the Exchange Building, a Greek Revival building of the 1840's. The south side forms a party wall with an adjacent building. No out-buildings.
2. Landscaping and walks: The building is separated from the street on the north and east by a sidewalk (6' wide).

Prepared by John M. McRae
Supervisory Architect
Historic American
Buildings Survey
August 1968

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records are part of the documentation made during the 1968 Petersburg Summer Project, undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey in cooperation with The Historic Petersburg Foundation, Inc., with financial assistance from The Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission. During the summer, records were made of twenty-two buildings in the city.

The project was under the general supervision of James U. Massey, Chief, Historic American Buildings Survey. Project Supervisor was John M. McRae of the University of Florida. The recording team was composed of Randall J. Biallas, historian (University of Illinois, Urbana), and student assistant architects Michael Hamilton (University of Arizona), Thomas J. Sanford (Washington State University), and Edwin S. Smith, Jr. (Rhode Island School of Design). Photographs were made by George Eisenman.